



WE SUSTAIN EACH OTHER

At 109 years old, St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church in Baltimore had deep roots in the community but was in danger of closing. The congregation's unstable situation was akin to many others in southeast Baltimore in 2009, the year Mark Parker, their current pastor, arrived. At the time there were approximately 25 to 30 commuter members.

Parker said it was their synod's director for evangelical mission that suggested rapidly transforming the congregation by focusing on the surrounding community. This changed St. Paul into what is now known as Breath of God Lutheran Church.

"A congregation in decline in terms of numbers and energy and people has a really hard time reversing that because you need resources in order to do different things," Parker said. "Each year [the new-start funds] gave us room to grow without a sense of scarcity or anxiety it could all fall apart next month because we couldn't pay the bills."

Breath of God is in an area that is rich in diversity: "This neighborhood has a lot of young professionals moving to it, but it also has a lot of working-class people and poor people, a big burgeoning Hispanic population, and refugees," said member Mary MacDonald. "This church is where all those different groups come together."

In order to grow, the congregation began to shift its focus outward to its surrounding neighborhood.

"We do a lot more community outreach than we did in the last 25 years," said longtime member Joe Burk. "The building is used every day of the week."

The new direction invigorated current members and began attracting new ones.

"I felt inspired in a way where I haven't felt before from a church," said member Jennifer Pruitt. "I wanted to find ways to be a better person, to be more open, to be a better community member."

The change in focus would not have been possible were it not for the funds Breath of God received through Mission Support, according to Parker. At the same time, they contribute between 10 and 12 percent of their annual offerings to Mission Support.

"It's interesting because we give Mission Support and then we're getting it back," he said. "That's how the church works; we sustain each other. The point of church is to gather people together, to be nurtured around the word and table of God and to be sent into the world to be of some use to our neighbors and not in small ways but in big transformative ways."

 **Watch a video of Breath of God members discussing their ministry at [ELCA.org/SOFIA](https://www.elca.org/SOFIA).**

Your Mission Support dollars are used by the ELCA churchwide organization to support directors for evangelical mission and new congregations like Breath of God.